COMMITTEE MEETING ON YOSEMITE MATTER

A committee meeting of members of the Commission of Fine Arts was called to convene at the Century Club, New York City, on July 3, to meet representatives of the Interior Department in regard to certain questions of design for structures proposed to be located on the floor of the Yosemite Valley, concerning which they wished the advice of the Commission of Fine Arts.

The Chairman had appointed Mr. Hastings, Mr. Gilbert, Mr. Anderson and Mr. Adams a committee with power to act in this matter. These members of the committee were all present. Mr. Blashfield and the Chairman also attended, ex officio, and Colonel Harts, Secretary and Executive Officer of the Commission, and Mr. Cammerer, the Clerk.

Representing the Interior Department were Mr. Stephen T. Mather, Assistant to the Secretary of the Interior, and Mr. R. B. Marshall, Superintendent of National Parks. Mr. Robert C. Spencer, Jr., of Spencer and Powers, Architects of Chicago, Illinois, also appeared later informally at the request of Mr. Mather.

No written request or submission had been made; the whole matter thus far having been discussed in Washington over the 'phone by Mr. Marshall and Colonel Harts.

Mr. Mather first stated that plans for improvements in the Yosemite Park, more particularly in the main Yosemite Valley, had been contemplated for two or three administrations. At first the valley had been under State control but was ceded to the national Government about ten years ago. Under the State control a little village had grown up in the park and that, of that settlement, the Hotel Sentinel remains the only building of a permanent character on the floor of the valley for the housing of guests; on Glacier Point, however, there is another hotel under Government ownership. He stated that it was realized that something should be done to provide better accommodations for the tourists there, and that former

the other accessories which are the almost inevitable and [illegible] proper accommodations of a large gathering of tourists.

Secretary Walter Fisher was the first to start a plan to have a new hotel erected. Congress was, however, unwilling to appropriate funds for such Government establishments there, so it was found necessary to find a concessionaire. Negotiations for this were begun but failed because promoters got too busy.

He mentioned Mr. Mark Daniels as the first Superintendent of National Parks, an office which was started by Secretary Lane under the direct jurisdiction of Dr. Adolph Miller. Mr. Mark Daniels' first scheme included a village and other larger buildings and Mr. Mather indicated what that scheme was in a pamphlet that he had brought with him. He added that Mr. Marshall had succeeded Mr. Daniels, and that, while Mr. Marshall was not an architect, he was a close friend of the valley. He continued that last summer they had found a Mr. Desmond, in charge of the Commissary out there, who had considerable experience in the hotel business; and that they were very favorably impressed with him as being the right man to manage a hotel and refectory service for the various tourists visiting the valley. Mr. Desmond had been told that if he did good work and showed satisfactory results he would be given a long time concession. He started a temporary camp last summer, rendering very satisfactory results. In other words he had made good, and was therefore last winter given a twenty-year concession for a location in the valley and another one to be located on Glacier Point just outside of the valley, and also for the location of a number of houses or camps in the "upper country". He is now under obligation to build three of these upper camps, one at Lake Merced, another at the Tuolumne Mountains, and another elsewhere in the vicinity. Mr. Mather said they wanted to avoid the type of the hotel at the Yellowstone and, naturally, extravagance in everything; and hoped to be able to confine Mr. Desmond to an expenditure for a hotel of about $150,000. They did not want to do rush work but did not want, on the other hand, to delay Mr. Desmond.

Mr. Marshall took up the talk at this point and stated that last Fall he and a party of officials of the Interior Department, at the direction of the

Secretary of the Interior, had visited the Yosemite Valley and inspected the site for the hotel in particular. Mr. Mark Daniels was one of their party. After an inspection they were not particularly satisfied with Mr. Daniels' choice of a site for the hotel and changed it to another location (which he pointed out on the map), one reason being to escape the seepage of water to which the old location was subject, but that the actual difference between the two sites as far as appearances went was hardly apparent.

Mr. Moore asked him at this point what was the fundamental idea that lead to the location of the hotel at the new point. Mr. Marshall replied that in choosing a place for the hotel he would naturally choose the point selected because of the beautiful views in almost every direction. He stated that if a number of trees were cut down one would probably be able to see almost the most important views in the whole valley - that one could not find a more charming place.

He laid before the members a number of designs that had been tentatively submitted to his Department, one set being by Mr. Mulgardt, and another one by Mr. Daniels, and another by Edwin J. Symmes. He then produced a number of topographical maps, one of which showed the Yosemite Valley and another the proposed locations for the four or five main buildings under consideration, - a large hotel, a garage, a store-house, a pavilion and a swimming pool. He added that Mr. Desmond principally wanted to get the best views from the windows of the hotel because otherwise he would have to cut down some of the trees which he did not care to do. He mentioned that Mr. Mark Daniels was definitely disconnected with the service; and that Mr. Mulgardt was not officially connected with the Government - that Mr. Desmond personally engaged him to design the main hotel structure, and the designs A and G were the result. (See files for A and G).

Mr. Gilbert at this point took up the discussion. He said that he was in the park for a few days a couple of years ago, and that he saw John Muir at that time. He dwelt at some length upon his experiences and impressions for the benefit of the members of the Committee who had not been there (it was ascertained that of the members present none had been there recently, Mr. Olmsted at one time). He concluded that in his opinion no structure should be erected on the floor of the valley, but that any proposed buildings of the type under consideration should be located at some of the near entrances to the valley, perhaps at El Portal.

In the discussion that ensued Mr. Moore read a letter which Mr. Olmsted had transmitted to him, which also stated that in general that no matter what type of buildings might be designed for erection on the floor of the valley, they should not go there but should be located elsewhere. This also was the general feeling among the other members of the committee present. They feared that in view of the progress that had already been made in this matter it might be too late to take any radical action to accomplish the best results, but voiced the hope that this administration would signalize itself by sweeping everything extraneous and artificial from the valley. Mr. Gilbert added that if they are to go ahead with the buildings as proposed on the floor of the valley, they could probably not have selected a better site, but that in his opinion buildings in this location would impair the beauty of the whole Yosemite. He said that the valley has the greatest natural beauty in the world and that concessions would increase from year to year and branch out all over the floor of the valley because of this precedent which was being established.

Mr. Mather and Mr. Marshall stated that they both felt the same way, but that this could not well be done now; and that the committee would have to accept as a conclusion of the Interior Department that the site on the floor of the valley had been definitely passed upon. They stated that they had hoped for Congressional assistance in the matter of appropriations so the Government could build its own hostelries on a commensurate scale and that they had shown congressional committees that it would be a

profitable venture since, for instance, in the Yellowstone Park on a two million dollar investment the profits were over eight hundred thousand dollars per annum. Mr. Mather stated that if Congress could be induced to make the necessary appropriation, which from a business standpoint would appear to be the proper thing to do, the valley floor could be saved because they would not have to consider then as a private concessionaire would the competition that is now going on there among those already located in the hotel business on the floor of the valley. As it was, if Mr. Desmond's hotel site was to be removed to Mahona bridge or in the vicinity of El Portal his business would be destroyed because of the competition of those already established on the floor of the valley, and who could not well be moved. Four camps are already there and these would certainly compete with Mr. Desmond's hotel if the latter were to be located elsewhere, and then Mr. Desmond would have to withdraw from the project altogether. (It appeared that those squatting on the floor of the valley were firmly entrenched politically, and that this was the reason they were not being ousted).

Mr. Mather added that the floor of the Yosemite Valley was a great place for camping, and that small private camps dotted it here and there in great numbers. It was practically impossible in his opinion to eliminate camps and buildings from the floor of the valley. He added that Congress was going to put in an electric light plant. He pointed to the Hetch Hetchy matter where the lovers of nature were overruled in favor of strictly utilitarian schemes. He stated that Mr. Desmond had been subjected to a great deal of criticism because he had not been going ahead with the permanent improvements and that the Interior Department is now also being criticised for it; that they were anxious to make good but were not going to be rushed into anything inconsiderate. He concluded as his definite opinion that, as a practicable thing, it was not workable to put the building scheme in elsewhere.

The policing of the camps and various sanitary arrangements made and to be made were then briefly touched upon.

In view of the above conclusion the discussion then revolved on the problem of design and style of architecture for the buildings. Mr. Mather stated that the plans he brought along were tentative and placed before the committee merely to assist in the discussion. In other words, there was no formal plan before the Committee. Mr. Mather expressed the hope that several members of the Commission would go out to inspect the location in order to be able from a first-hand knowledge to assist him regarding the best kind of buildings to go up there and offered to defray the expenses of such a committee out of his own pocket. While his offer was appreciated, it was not found practicable to accept it.

Lunch was served about this time. The discussion continued in general throughout and after the lunch. As a result Mr. Gilbert was authorized, with the assistance of Mr. Moore, to prepare a formal report to be made the Interior Department through Colonel Harts. This formal report was not made, however, since the Chairman discussed and concluded the matter personally with Mr. Mather and Mr. Marshall at a later date in Washington. He furnished a memorandum for the files to conclude this matter which is attached hereto as exhibit "A". Mr. Olmsted's letter referred to in paragraph 2, on page 4, is attached as exhibit "B".

Colonel, U. S. Army,

Secretary and Executive Officer.

Approved:

Chairman.

Dear Moore:

I am extremely sorry that I cannot get off from my engagement in New Hampshire tomorrow to attend the committee meeting in New York on the Yosemite matter.

In trying to express any opinion upon questions of design affecting Yosemite I labor under a great disadvantage because of the many years which have elapsed since I was last in the Valley. Under such circumstances to take a strong position and a serious moment of responsibility either in approval or in disapproval in any project affecting the Yosemite is dangerous. And yet to be silent is to be shirking an important duty. With these qualifications I will state my impressions about the building project which Mr. Cramer has submitted to me.

The proposed buildings are of considerable size but it is not likely that they are much larger than is necessary to meet the requirements of visitors to the park in the immediate future. Indeed I understand that a large part of the existing buildings will still remain in use after the erection of those shown in the designs submitted and that it will soon be necessary to provide additional new structures of a large extent to replace those temporary buildings. It seems to me that there is every reason to suppose that in the course of the next twenty years the number of visitors to the valley will increase enormously as compared with any increase which has taken place in the past, and there will be before many years a legitimate demand for accommodations several times greater than those shown in these buildings.

Now, no matter what style of architecture is adopted, - no matter whether the buildings are small, low, and numerous, covering many acres of ground, or whether they are large, compact, and of many stories, there can be no principle that structures sufficient to accommodate comfortably and liberally the thousands of visitors who are going to demand shelter and accommodations will form a conspicuous element in the scenery of the Yosemite Valley from almost any point of view and will be a very considerable importance. If there is any landscape in the world in which the element of human control over nature ought to be subordinated so that it from asserting itself it is in the Yosemite.

The problem facing the authorities in charge of the park is to make it possible for great numbers of people to see and enjoy this extraordinary scenery under conditions which will enable them to get the highest possible enjoyment from it. Such conditions must include of the most adequate, convenient and comfortable means of getting to the scenery and getting about in it, and of being housed and fed and otherwise taken care of while in the vicinity. But they must also include such location and design of all these and every utilities as will not appreciably impair the scenery which they are intended to make available.

Perhaps all that I have said above is platitudes, but it is certainly true, and my impression is very strong that the wise application of these principles in the case in hand would call for the concentration of the great quantity of buildings in which we must look forward in some locality other than in the very heart of the Yosemite landscape. With well-built roads and an adequate auto service I am sure that there is no reason why the hotel buildings and practically all the tributary structures which must be associated with them should not be placed a few miles away from the heart of the valley. Whether the best location for such a concentration will be at El Portal or somewhere else I cannot pretend to judge. I feel almost certain that such inconveniences as the visitors might suffer if they were to be housed in the vicinity of El Portal or somewhere else outside of the natural landscape of the Yosemite would be in the long run very small as compared with the impairment of the landscape by the construction in it of hotels, garages, swimming pools, stores, shanties and all the other accessories which are the almost inevitable and entirely proper accommodations of a large gathering of tourists.